

New professional body

— are technicians in or out?

By Steve Acres

Steve Acres, vice-president of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians (UK), looks at why there is opposition to technicians being included in the new professional body for pharmacy and how APTUK is addressing this



Different membership categories will be needed in the new professional body

The role of the Association of Pharmacy Technicians (UK) could change dramatically over the next few years, as a result of the changes occurring within pharmacy regulation and professional leadership.

Following publication of the Government White Paper "Trust, assurance and safety — the regulation of health professionals in the 21st Century", APTUK national officers, on behalf of its members, started to work on how APTUK could best support and be served by a new structure.

Major change

APTUK recognises and accepts that major change will be necessary. We see this as a great opportunity — not a threat. We also accept that it might not be possible to adapt the current APTUK organisation to the new model for the professional body for pharmacy, and this has been an important factor in our deliberations. Having realised early on that adaptation might not be the best way forward, we have identified three core functions that we think need consideration:

- Regulation (protecting patients)
- Professional leadership (striving for excellence)

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- Representation (standing up for the rights of health care professionals in a manner similar to, or having links with, a trade union)

APTUK currently undertakes the latter two functions and our discussions focused on these. Regulation will be delivered by the new General Pharmaceutical Council, which will mean a change of provider for pharmacy technicians. And since the Government does not seem to favour organisations that combine professional leadership and representation, we decided it would be appropriate not to take this particular route.

We welcome the concept of a professional body for pharmacy rather than for pharmacists. We believe that a body for pharmacy would provide a more cohesive approach to leadership, than the current approach. We set out to produce a logical and reasoned case for pharmacy technicians to be part of an inclusive professional body (see Panel 1, p108, for details on how to access this statement).

APTUK recognises that pharmacists and pharmacy technicians differ in terms of education, entry criteria for the jobs, and many of the roles performed. It is a myth that pharmacy technicians want to take over the role of pharmacists — we support extended roles for technicians on the basis that this allows the release of pharmacist time to perform more clinically oriented duties. This model maximises skill mix, a concept that has been widely adopted across the NHS and in pharmacy.¹

Opposition

So, why is there such vociferous opposition to the admission of pharmacy technicians into the same professional body as pharmacists? We should point out that, to date, the responses to the Clarke Inquiry have shown limited opposition to pharmacy technician membership. We have examined some of the reasons given in letters and articles published by the pharmacy press, and in submissions to the Clarke Inquiry, and have grouped them into the following points:

- Pharmacists and technicians are separate and independent professions
- There is a conflict of interest
- Pharmacy technicians are not professionals
- The inclusion of pharmacy technicians would "devalue" the professional body

Pharmacists and technicians are separate and independent professions Supply of medicines to patients is part of a continuous process dealt with by both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, each with distinct but sometimes shared roles. Separate professional bodies would be likely to take inter-professional working in the opposite direction to the one required. We must continue to work together for the benefit of patients. A shared professional body is more likely to encourage joint working to continually improve processes and professional development which can benefit patients and pharmacy professionals alike.

There is a conflict of interest We suspect that when “conflict of interest” is raised, it relates to the tensions that can arise when a pharmacy technician is employed by a pharmacist. This is an employment relations issue which, in this context, falls under the umbrella of representation; it should not be confused with professional leadership. Further conflict may arise from a lack of understanding of each other’s roles, particularly with the proliferation of extended roles for pharmacy technicians. Again, we believe that a shared professional body would help resolve this issue.

Pharmacy technicians are not professionals The status of technicians as professionals was recognised some years ago in a joint statement between the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and APTUK. If technicians need regulating, they need professional leadership and must, therefore, be considered professionals.

The inclusion of pharmacy technicians would “devalue” the professional body This approach is elitist and is not supported by any evidence. There are numerous examples, both in the UK and internationally, of pharmacists and pharmacy technicians sharing the same professional organisation successfully. Examples of these form part of the

submission to the Clarke Inquiry and can be found on the Clarke Inquiry website (www.theclarkeinquiry.com) or via *PJ Online* (www.pjonline.com/hplinks).

We have yet to find any specific examples or scenarios that support these reasons for excluding pharmacy technicians.

— Membership

There has been much discussion about the form of membership pharmacy technicians should be granted if they were to be admitted to a professional body for pharmacy.

APTUK has never said that pharmacy technicians should have “full membership” (indeed, membership categories have not yet been defined). What we have said is that we recognise that pharmacists and pharmacy

Panel 1: APTUK response
The Association of Pharmacy Technicians (UK) statement on why pharmacy technicians should be part of an inclusive professional leadership body can be found on the APTUK website (www.aptuk.org) and can be accessed via *PJ Online* (www.pjonline.com/hplinks). The paper forms part of the APTUK submission to the Clarke Inquiry.

technicians are different and that different membership categories are needed to reflect that difference. We would prefer not to be considered as “affiliate” or “associate” members, and have stated this in our submission to the Clarke Inquiry. We believe that these terms convey the impression that we are not fully integrated into the body. A simple category of “pharmacy technician member” would make it clear that we are not pharmacists and any membership postnominals (letters after our names) could reflect that fact. If pharmacy technicians are admitted to the new body, we would expect representation within the organisational structure.

— Summary

APTUK recognises that the admission of pharmacy technicians into the same professional body as pharmacists is an emotive subject. We wish to work constructively with other pharmacy organisations to form the strongest possible professional body. We believe that open and fair debate is the right mechanism for achieving this.

— References

1. Audit Commission. A spoonful of sugar — medicines management in NHS hospitals. London: Audit Commission; 2001.